DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 264 CS 213 331

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TITLE A Cooperative Rhetoric for Professional Communication.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; Case Studies; *Cooperative Learning; *Course Content; Feminism; Higher Education; *Ideology; Language Role; Moral Values; *Rhetoric; Technical Writing
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Writing; Professional Communication

ABSTRACT

Professional communication as commonly taught and practiced encourages the avoidance of ethical concerns and responsibilities. Communicators are asked to accept the assumption that they are engaged in the value-free transmission of objective truth. Teachers should go beyond instruction in communication techniques to engage students more deeply in the nature and function of effective professional communication. Such a reconceptualization rests in part on the assumption that language use constructs people's versions of reality and so is inherently ideological. A corollary recognizes that it is not possible to communicate objectively about external realities. The feminist perspective has identified ways in which collaborative thinking and writing can be used more productively educationally and professionally. Strategies include sensitivity to others' emotions and nonverbal cues, acknowledgement of previous speakers, and willingness to include self-disclosure. The teaching of professional communication should emphasize collaborative dialectic and ask students to make searching examinations of the ideologies that define their future professional responsibilities. Students should engage in critical reading and collaborative writing. Their assignments should include mediation and negotiation exercises, investigations of writings produced by companies they admire, and case studies. Professional writing courses can become contexts for practicing innovative strategies. Revised perceptions of language use in the professional world can change that world for the better. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (SG)

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A Cooperative Rhetoric for Professional Communication

An increasing number of studies of professional communication focus on its relationship to ethics. This focus, at least as it is on practitioners of professional communication, is nothing new in American rhetorical theory; forty years ago the politically conservative Richard Weaver and the politically radical Kenneth Burke both were noting that our society's technological orientation has weakened individuals' ethical responsibilities when they engage in communication in the world of work. Recently Steven Katz has argued that technological and economic expediency have replaced more traditional ethical values and contends that this replacement was able to create the Nazi society that carried out a world war and mass extermination; he then warns that a similar ethos exists in the United States' merger of technology and industrial capitalism.

One does not have to accept everything in Katz's argument to agree that professional communication as commonly taught and practiced encourages the avoidance of ethical concerns and responsibilities. I could cite once again Weaver and Burke, as well as Althusser, Giroux, Perelman, and a host of others, to argue that education serves the interests of the society's elite, indoctrinating students in order to prepare them to fill positions needed for the maintenance of the current socio-economic system. Professional communicators are taught to be, in Thomas Miller's phrase, "mere technicians of the word," whose purpose is to transmit through the appropriate forms and with the appropriate style fixed and knowable objective truths (58). They are asked to accept--consciously or not--the assumption that they are engaged in the value-free transmission of objective truth. One might add to this assumption that neither teachers nor practitioners of professional communication are supposed to be concerned with the ethical and political implications of their activities. Thus Patricia Bizzell claims that when liberal teachers are faced with the question of

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whether to define ethical goals for students or let them define their own, most opt for the latter ("Marxist" 64). Yet choosing this option does not mean that ethics has been eschewed in the classroom, rather, that the ethics of the dominant ideology has been at least implicitly condoned. The ethics of the approach I have been describing makes those who teach or practice "writing for the world of work" similar to, as Dale Sullivan bluntly puts it, the literate slaves of the classical world, whose superiors made the ethical and political decisions regarding what issues would be addressed and how they would be presented to their audiences (380).

Sullivan's eye-opening comparison ought to suggest at least one of the problems with this approach to professional communication. Teachers should question their roles in preparing students for IBM or General Motors or other of the dominant corporations in the United States, despite demands by our students to prepare them for their future servitude, for, as Frederic Jameson has pointed out, ideological control may be so strong that the oppressed assent to their oppression, wanting only to be like their oppressors. Of course we should make sure that students understand the formats for business letters, the structures of proposals and reports, the organizational differences among good-news, bad-news, and sales letters, and so on. However, we should go beyond a teaching of these techniques to engage students more deeply in the nature and function of effective professional communication. That is, in addition to questioning whether we should ignore the ethical implications of our work, we should also consider our work's effectiveness. I want to consider now some ways in which instruction in professional communication can be reconceptualized to improve the dimensions of ethics and effectiveness.

The reconceptualization rests on several closely related assumptions, the most fundamental of which is that language use constructs people's versions of reality and

so is inherently ideological. This assumption holds that reality as we know it is conceptually organized and interpreted, and that the versions of reality which individuals hold are socially constructed, more or less by the individual but always in concert with members of a community. A corollary to this assumption recognizes that we cannot communicate objectively about external realities, that personal histories, gender, and values determine how we understand and therefore communicate. By denying the possibility of objective professional discourse, these assumptions invoke an alternative model of communication based on an understanding of how ideology works and on building and maintaining consensual versions of reality. And, since reaching such consensus requires that participants be political equals, adept at democratic negotiation-- which is to say, skilled in expressing and judging others' responses--I also assume that professional writing courses should be in part an education for democracy.

Some of those studies to which I alluded at the beginning of this paper examine professional communication from a feminist perspective, with one of the most frequently examined areas that of collaboration. While collaborative thinking and writing has always been a large part of professional writers' work activities, the particular feminist contribution has been to suggest ways to make the process more productive educationally and professionally. Strategies, as many feminists see them, include sensitivity to others' emotions and nonverbal cues, acknowledgment of previous speakers and restatement of their positions, and willingness to include self-disclosure. In an article in the Harvard Business Review, Judy Rosener maintains that women bring to collaborative projects these skills and also the ability to signal trust and respect for the participants, with the result that participants self-worth is enhanced as well as their support for decisions the group will make.

Some feminists as well as some other scholars take issue, however, with the way collaboration is sometimes conceived. The issue to some extent turns on the teacher's role in the collaborative process, and while generally Friere's preference for the teacher-student and student-teacher relations is accepted, there is less agreement on the exact nature of the teacher's status. Mary Belenky and her co-authors of Women's Ways of Knowing talk about the nurturing role that teachers should maintain, but they also cite the Socratic metaphor of the teacher as "mid-wife," whose role is to "preserve the student's fragile newborn thoughts, to see that they are born with their truth intact, that they do not turn into acceptable lies" (218). To nurture is clearly not to accept whatever a student may say in order to develop that student's self-esteem. And Bill Karis argues that teachers should not approach a collaborative situation predisposed towards compromise, since that may restrict the group's degree of success; his point is that one person's view may be more valid than another's--or even "right" for a particular situation--yet could end up compromised for the sake of group consensus. He refers to Bruffee's belief that we (to quote Bruffee) "establish knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by challenging each other's biases and presuppositions" and he also refers to Burke's notion of "cooperative competition" in dialectical exchange.

My point is that the teaching of professional communication should engage students in the process of collaborative thinking but that that this process should include the assumption that some positions are better than others and that the process is better when it searches for these positions instead of limiting itself to the nurturing of whatever positions students bring to the classroom. However, pedagogies that see professional communicators only as technicians of the word are not likely to emphasize collaborative dialectic and less likely to ask students to make searching

examinations of the ideologies that define their future professional responsibilities. Yet these searching examinations are, I believe, necessary for a successful education. First they are valuable tools in developing students' rhetorical maturity. Since rhetoric--including professional communication--is concerned with matters of probability rather than certainty, good professional communicators are aware that audiences have presumptions and arguments that differ from their own and that have more or less merit in their own right. The more clearly students understand this and the better able they are to imagine or discover and then examine these alternative views, the better they will be at evaluating them and dealing professionally with them. Second, beyond a specific rhetorical education, searching examinations are useful for students' general education. As Miller puts matters, students should realize that "technology and information are themselves not merely matters of technical expertise but are social practices that must be held accountable to our shared values and needs" (68). As students examine challenges to their ideological perspective as well as to the ideology of the workplace, they will develop the awareness that all perspectives are socially constructed; the result, as those interested in critical thinking can attest, is the development of intellectual and ethical maturity, useful in any profession as it is useful in life.

Perhaps you have been wondering what kind of searching examinations I have in mind. I think it essential to ask students to question their beliefs, and, at least in the courses I teach that are populated with students from the business and engineering colleges, their beliefs are congruent with those held by corporate America. However, while there is a great deal to be said for the devil's advocate position in the attempt to develop critical thinking, I believe that Bell Hooks and Patricia Bizzell are quite right when they say that asking students to deconstruct ideologies they hold dear is very

painful for them. Unless we offer our students an alternative, Bizzell continues, we leave them only the "hip smirk" of skepticism, and they will resent being goaded by grades and teacher authority to give up their own beliefs for such negative alternatives (Talking Back 102; "Marxist" 670-71). Hooks, Bizzell and others instead call on teachers to state clearly their position early in the course of instruction.[1] I agree. I believe that we need to tell students that we too are inescapably ideological and that we need to tell them clearly what are specific ideological positions are. Thus, I tell students that I favor sexual and racial equality in the workplace, a pro-labor, pro-environmental position, and stringent penalties for businesses that make profits more important than people and the environment. I do not make students espouse my views, but I do make sure that the structure of my course and the nature of my assignments ask them to examine their views in the light of these issues and their practical implications. How would I do this?

Time does not permit an extensive discussion, but I will offer a few comments. First, equipping students in such a difficult course includes an emphasis on critical reading. As Gregory Clark contends, students need to know that their readings and writings have meaning only within a community, and that they cannot contribute responsibly to communal exchange until they understand the currently shared knowledge in the community. As they develop critical reading skills, their status in the community changes from apprentice to critical collaborator in the development of common knowledge, and they are more likely to realize that they must guard against seeing their written discourse as more than contingent truth (69).

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[1] In an interview with Donaldo Macedo, Paulo Freire takes a similar position, saying, "There is no educational practice that does not point to an objective." If an educator believes that "since [students] are individuals deserving respect, they should determine their own direction," that educator "refuses to convince his learners of what he thinks is just. This educator, then, ends up helping the power struggle" (139).

A key to engaging the active participation of all students is to use readings to set up discussions that provide contexts for a dialectical give and take among the class members. Dialectic, like Freire's "problem-posing" method, evokes critical reflection of teacher and students together, and is superior to a teacher's thinking through the problem privately and then lecturing to the class afterwards. Carefully managed, it helps students clarify the ideological nature of what they perhaps had perceived as objective reality, and it helps develop a skill that will stand them in good stead in their careers and further adult lives. The dialectic process uses the enthymeme, which, as John Gage and others have written, helps direct classroom dialectic.[2] By determining shared assumptions, which include the intellectual and emotional needs and predispositions of the audiences, and by weighing competing positions against one another, writers simulate a communal dialectic. The enthymeme affirms knowledge the rhetor and audience share and asserts on that basis potential extensions or applications of that knowledge: We change our own perceptions of shared knowledge as we consider them in light of the attitudes of those we would address (Clark 28-29).

A strong emphasis on the cooperative competition of a healthy collaboration is crucial to these goals. It is crucial that <u>everyone</u> have a voice, since contrary voices, as Clark, Karis, and Hooks say, are necessary to keep a consensus view from rigidifying and to maintain the ongoing refinement necessary to meet everchanging conditions. Collaboration should extend to writing projects done throughout the term. Although there are many effective projects available, I will mention three. The first has been discussed by Catherine Lamb in an article on negotiation and mediation. Such assignments seem particularly useful since they emphasize respect for others and require collaboration in constructing solutions. For mediation and negotiation assignments, Lamb asks that students, once they have articulated clearly and

[2] See Gage; Green; Jacobi; Jacobi

monologically their sides of the problem, collaborate on documents that resolve the problem in ways satisfactory to all parties.

My second sequence asks students to investigate writing of companies for which they might wish to work or which do business in professional areas of interest to them. Through their investigation they learn about the target companies and, more broadly, gain a fuller understanding of how business communication operates. Such practice follows Freire's education as praxis as it turns classroom activities toward collective inquiry into the function of discourse in the business world. Jo Allen, responding to the failure of technical writing assignments to reflect the impact of gender issues in the workplace, identifies a wide range of topics such as alternative workstyles and dress codes, sexual harassment policies, day care and other employee benefits, and hiring and promotion policies (387). Even though such assignments permit students to "demonstrate the kinds of management and leadership decisions and communications [they] would actually execute within an organization," Allen claims that "[s]tudents who intend to pursue business careers rarely get an opportunity even to discuss these issues, much less respond to them in writing" (388). Beyond engaging students in the valuable activity of producing original knowledge, such research can help to sensitize them to the subtler aspects of corporate culture, notably the ways in which discourse contributes to such practices as the socialization of employees and the exercise of power in organizations.

A third useful sequence comes from case studies. True, some cases can be artificial, but they get students involved in areas that ought to be important to them. Additionally they develop contexts for writing, asking students to consider needs and expectations of audiences and ramifications of their decisions; assignments that do not mandate students' decisions require them to develop fully a dialectic to determine

the appropriate documents for their audience. A case study of, for instance, a corporation considering a move of its manufacturing plant to Mexico, while requiring a dialectical investigation of the issues, might begin with "testimonials"--of a textile worker in the United States who has lost his or her job, a corporate executive who thinks that this is the best way for the company to benefit or even survive, a woman factory worker in Mexico who works in unsafe conditions for less that a dollar an hour and no health or retirement benefits. These testimonials provide information for the ensuing dialectic, and they also add the explicitly human component to the normal data set. Further, a case study can--and should--have more than just two, polarized sides to the dialectic; to the group already mentioned one might add the voices of a politician in a textile state and a consumer hard pressed to clothe her children on her meager salary. It is not only important to provide a number of voices, but also particularly important to provide voices not normally allowed to speak, such as, specifically, the Mexican woman worker.

Testimonials might be moving but not convincing to all, since they may be perceived as "anecdotal" and "emotional," rather than "representative" and "objective." Similar complaints might be brought against the use of public relations films and documentaries, which, while they better engage students more comfortable with television and movies than with reading, can be said to be biased. A documentary on Maquiladora workers might be seen by some students as leftist America-bashing, and the public relations films might be seen by others as right wing propaganda. The lessons I would emphasize throughout are that <u>all</u> the information students gather is charged with ideological bias and that what may appear as leftist America-bashing

can have some merit and even power once the first lesson is understood.[3]

By sensitizing students to the ideologies informing perceptions of reality, my aim is not to inculcate them with a particular ideology but to help them consider the implications of inhabiting socially constructed realities and to empower them to think critically and make informed choices. Such awareness, I believe, will make them less susceptible to manipulation and thus more likely to assume responsibility for their choices. It will also foster a fuller appreciation for collaboration as a necessity for functioning within the discourse communities. And it will provide them with the option to use the skill of collaboration to evaluate the system into which they ask to enter. As such, I believe that teaching professional writing in the manner I have described will enable students to contribute more actively and meaningfully as professionals and as citizens.

It is possible that such changes in the way that professional communication is taught can have effects on students' perceptions of their future professional lives. As Kathleen Welch argues, "If students achieve adequate consciousness of the ways they have been conditioned to respond and if they empower themselves through writing and the dialectic of inquiry, then the status quo might be in danger. If we empower too many students, they might want to change substantially the general culture we all partake of and help to create" (156). Wayne Booth also calls for free discourse, respect for people's civil rights, and democratic processes in his rhetorical theory.

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[3] To use such a case in the classroom, I try to get three or four groups. Within the group should be articulated perspectives of the boss and stockholders, middle management and laborers, state employees, and the Mexican workers (this last from company researchers or a non-profit agency). The groups work to put their research and perspectives into an article, for the Wall Street Journal, for instance. Students from different groups who are researching the same perspectives also collaborate in the production of the sections they are going to bring to their own groups. They have different perspectives on their perspectives, and whether or not they use their colleagues' ideas, the collaboration is useful.

Following the implications of such a rhetoric, he continues, means that we must discard capitalist forms of production and distribution that depend upon systematic deception; discard the assumption that people aren't accountable to their fellows for how they acquire and spend their private fortunes; discard the tendency of the economic system to encourage in citizens "viciousness, deception, and privatization to the point of psychosis"; and discard the political use of deceptive techniques borrowed from advertising, since ultimately they will cause citizens to lose faith in the government (201-202n). Welch's and Booth's visions are radical indeed, yet it is not a foregone conclusion that the kind of course I have been sketching will produce such revolutionary results. Students may come to realize that their perception of the world is an artificial construct; they may decide that it does not deserve their support and then work to change to it. But they may choose to put their improved communication skills to use in their current society, which they may see as more or less ethical. And it is possible that a more democratic approach to professional communication will help to democratize corporate policies generally. Rosener persuasively shows that what she calls "women's ways of leadership" in the corporate world have proven quite successful, and Sally Helgesen provides case studies of successful women employing these approaches. Professional writing courses can become contexts for practicing innovative strategies and so inform students' approaches to professional writing situations once they enter their careers. I contend that as revised perceptions of discourse change the way language is used in the professional world, they will change the reality of that world, for the better.

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